

Ancient Science and Technology of Colour

Pigments, dyes, drugs and their perception in Antiquity



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CONCEPT

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Our general assumption is that in Antiquity the term ‘art’ encompassed a wide spectrum of practices, encapsulated by the malleable category of *technē*. Various defined and much debated by both natural philosophers and experts in different fields, *technē* could refer to a variety of activities that manipulated natural substances in order to produce a great number of artefacts. After all, experts in carpentry, medicine, glass making, painting or other visual arts – just to name but a few examples – were all called *technitai*, namely, ‘artisans’ in Antiquity. And they all used to make and exploit *pharmaka*, whether these were medicines, paints, dyes or transmuting agents.

In such a context, technologies often arose that were at the crossroad of different arts, and this is precisely the case of the making of pigments and dyeing substances, which had a tremendous impact on ancient painting as well as on pharmacology, alchemy, and so on. Therefore, the possible relations, if not the contiguity, between the dyes production workshops and those of painters, alchemists or pharmacists will be explored in the first place.

Against this background, the envisaged case studies will help to answer critical questions of broadest cultural significance about the connection between colouring practices and the perceptual experience of colour. For example: which perceptual features and symbolic associations make certain colours privileged at a particular stage of ancient art (including painting and polichromy of statues) or of textile or metal dyeing, as well as the object of greater attention within the colour theories of Greek philosophers? Are such preferences sufficiently uniform to be traced back to ‘perceptual universals’ or are they culturally determined? Furthermore, one might ask to what extent could the availability of a certain material in a certain environment enter into this interplay of factors; and, whether a certain colour was deemed to be endowed with active power, as it seems to be the case in pharmacology, alchemy or magic, either in connection with its perceptual salience or its symbolic and cultural associations, or both.